TO MAKE THE WORLD BETTER
February 3, 2008

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 112
Isaiah 58:6–8
Matthew 5:13–16

"You are the salt of the earth. . . .
You are the light of the world"
Matthew 5:13,14 (NRSV)

A Christian congregation is a company of praying men and women who gather,
usually on Sundays, for worship, who then go into the world as salt and light.
God's Holy Spirit calls and forms this people. God means to do something with us. . . .
We are in on what God is doing, and we are in on it together.

Eugene H. Peterson
The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways Jesus is the Way

This religion of ours has a great deal to say about how life is lived in the world. And within that religion, this Presbyterian tradition—or brand, if you will—on occasion embraces with gusto that focus on how life is lived.

Someone sent me an excerpt from a sermon preached in 1892 in the Madison Square Presbyterian Church in New York City, an excerpt that made me laugh out loud. The Reverend Charles H. Parkhurst was a fierce and vocal critic of Tammany Hall, and in a sermon once denounced the New York City administration as a "damnable pack of administrative bloodhounds, polluted harpies, and a lying, perjured, rum-soaked libidinous lot" (*Union Seminary News*, Fall 2007).

I wonder what the congregation thought about that one on a quiet Sunday morning in Manhattan. Apparently they didn't fire him. He was pastor of that church for thirty-eight years.

Maybe they were used to it. Maybe they agreed. The point is that this particular religious tradition of ours has always, from the very beginning, in the sixteenth century, when John Calvin spoke about working conditions in

the factories of Geneva and advocated for child labor laws, this religious tradition of ours has always paid attention equally to matters of the spirit, the individual soul, and matters of the world.

In the Bible there is an internal dialogue going on. On the one hand, there are those who define religion as adhering to the religious law, practicing the rituals, praying, fasting, sacrificing. It is the religion of the temple.

On the other hand, in the Bible there are those who define religion on the basis of the difference it makes in the way life is lived. This is a religion that advocates for the poor, the weak and vulnerable. If the other is a Religion of the Temple, this is a Religion of the Streets, Homes, Marketplaces. The priest represents one; the prophet the other.

So Isaiah:

> Why do we fast, but you do not see?
> . . . Is not this the fast that I choose:
> to loose the bonds of injustice, . . .
> to share your bread with the hungry,
> to bring the homeless poor into your house?

That's the real thing, Isaiah is saying: religion that manifests itself in the world and the world becoming better, kinder, fairer for everyone. When you do those things—loose bonds of injustice, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless—"your light shall break forth like the dawn." It's not either-or: either Temple or Street, Ritual, or Social Action. It's both-and. It is the genius of Judaism, and it is our richest, most authentically biblical tradition.

Jesus was accused of subverting the religious law in his day, Temple Religion. His consistent critics were the Pharisees who practiced Temple Religion, were totally and admirably devoted to the laws and rituals of their religion. He, on the other hand, insisted that when he welcomed the unclean to his table, which the law prohibited, when he spoke with a sinful woman, he was not subverting the law but fulfilling it, practicing its true intent.

That is what he had in mind one day, early in his public ministry, when he reached back into the scriptures and invoked two powerful images: "You are the salt of the earth," he told his disciples. "You are the light of the world." Remember Isaiah? "When you feed the hungry and shelter the homeless . . . your light will break forth like the dawn." And the psalmist: gracious, merciful, righteous people "rise in the darkness as a light." "You are the light of the world, salt of the earth," Jesus says to his followers.

It is and can be a unifying dynamic between Jews and Christians. N. T. Wright, New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop, writes, "The New

Testament picks up from the Old the theme that God intends, in the end, to put the whole creation to rights" (*Simply Christian,* p. 217).

And Rabbi Irving Greenberg, distinguished scholar, chairman and professor in the Department of Jewish Studies of City College of the City University of New York, says that "God invites us as humans, the image of God, to enter into a covenantal partnership, a partnership of committed love, to join fully in perfecting the universe, *tikkun olam* ["to heal the world"]" (*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity,* p. 187).

Salt and light: powerful metaphors, active. Salt and light change things, make a big difference in the world.

Several years ago the children in our church school were studying the salt of the earth-light of the world passage. The teachers thought they might need a little help with the meaning of the metaphor, so they came up with an idea. They made popcorn. Into one bowl of hot popcorn they sprinkled salt. The other was left as it was, no salt. The children were invited to try each and to decide which they preferred. The salted popcorn tastes a lot better, they said. They learned that the followers of Jesus are supposed to make the world better. If you stand in line at the movie theater, as I do, to load up your bag of popcorn with something called "topping" and then salt, of course, you know the wisdom and power of Jesus' metaphor.

We probably ought also to acknowledge that salt is not very good for us and that we eat much too much of it. It is hidden in much of the packaged food we eat, in near lethal doses. But it does make food taste better.

I love something Robert Capon wrote on the subject once. Capon is an Episcopal priest, a good theologian, and a gourmet cook. He wrote a theological cookbook once, *The Supper of the Lamb: Culinary Reflection,* in which he observes:

> Food these days is often identified as the enemy. Butter, salt, sugar, eggs are all out to get you. And yet, at our best, we know better. Butter glorifies everything it touches. Salt is the sovereign perfecter of all flavors. Eggs are, pure and simple, one of the wonders of the world. And if you put them all together, you get not sudden death, but Hollandaise, which in its own way is not less a marvel than the Gothic arch, the computer chip or a Bach fugue. (Preface, p. xiii)

We are called by Jesus—individually, one by one, and together as his church —to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

Eugene Peterson is a thoughtful pastor–scholar. In reflecting on Jesus' words to the disciples about being salt and light, he says,

> But that is not the American way. The great American innovation in congregations is to turn it into a consumer enterprise. We Americans have developed a culture of acquisition. . . . It didn't take long for some of our brothers and sisters to develop consumer congregations. If we have a nation of consumers, obviously the quickest way to get them into our congregations is to identify what they want and give it to them . . . the gospel in consumer terms: entertainment, satisfaction, excitement, adventure, problem-solving, whatever. This is the language we Americans grow up on, the language we understand. We are the world's champion consumers, so why shouldn't we have state-of-the-art consumer churches?

There is only one thing wrong, Peterson concludes: "This is not the way God brings us into conformity with the life of Jesus" (*The Jesus Way*, pp. 6, 7).

And what might that way be? What might a community of Christians who understood and intended to live like that look like? He showed us. He lived it for us to see. He taught us to pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

He walked the dusty roads and the city streets of his world, his nation, his people, with his dear friends, men and women together. He loved them and ate and drank with them and laughed and talked late into the night. He asked them to try loving one another as he loved them.

He told them stories about a wounded man lying beside the road and the religious leaders walking fastidiously by on the other side and a racial minority, a despised "other," stopping to help, showing them what neighbor love looks like. He told them stories about a rebellious son running away from home, but never escaping the gracious reach of a father's love.

He welcomed the unwanted, the unclean, the marginalized, to his table and told stories about a heavenly banquet with a place for everyone.

He healed the sick, touched the lepers and the unclean, gathered children in his strong arms. He fed the hungry and comforted the grieving, raised the dead, and laughed in the face of death.

And as he died, victim of the worst thing that can be done to a person, he continued to love, forgiving his tormentors, until all his love, his life, was poured out.

That's what it looks like. Salt of the earth. Light of the world.

When we call ourselves “A Light in the City,” that is the goal to which we aspire and the standard by which we measure ourselves.

I was fascinated to read in *Forbes* magazine an article by Rick Warren, founder and pastor of Saddleback Church in California, one of the largest megachurches, and author of the best-selling *The Purpose-Driven Life*. He suggests that one of the great lessons of the twentieth century was that centralized planning and control no longer work. The network is a far older and more basic organizational pattern, and technology has turned the paradigm of networking into a global force. The largest network in the world, Warren says, is not Wal-Mart, with a mere 1.8 million employees, or McDonald’s. It is the Christian church, 2.3 billion strong, one out of every three human beings, linking people in every country, every social or ethnic group, every economic structure.

When the World Economic Forum in Davos says the future belongs to public and private partnerships, government, and business, they’re missing something. In a million villages around the world, the church is the only existing social structure. The church is an already existing distribution system, with a large pool of committed volunteers and built-in credibility.

Rick Warren tells about Rwanda, where Saddleback Church is doing impressive work with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Most people in Rwanda live hours from the nearest clinic but minutes from the nearest church. So churches are handing out antiviral pills.

We have learned that lesson in Cameroon, in our HIV/AIDS initiative. Working with the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon and local pastors, who have great credibility in their society, we are providing HIV/AIDS education, preventive measures, as well as treatment.

Salt of the earth, light of the world. There is a great hunger for authentic spirituality. Much of that hunger is focused in the direction of an internal spiritual exploration: prayer, meditation, silent retreats, labyrinths, journaling—all bear witness to the deep and pervasive need for authentic spirituality.

And the word we would add is about salt and light, the suggestion that real religion, real soul-satisfying, deeply gratifying religion, reaches out to the neighbor, the poor, the hungry and homeless, and in the name of Jesus Christ and for his sake and the sake of his kingdom on earth welcomes, embraces, feeds, shelters, clothes, loves.

Frederick Buechner writes,

> Be the light of the world, he says. Where there are dark places, be the light especially there. Be the salt of the earth. Bring out the true flavor of what it is to be alive truly. Be truly alive. Be life-givers to others. That is what Jesus tells the disciples to be. That is what he tells his church, tells us to be. Love each other, heal the sick, raise the dead. Cleanse lepers. Cast out demons.

The gracious promise is that when we do that, the world actually becomes a little better. A little bit of the kingdom of God actually comes into the world —to you and me—and our light shall break forth the like the dawn.

Amen.